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## A Woman Devoted to Land, Faith and Family

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Sarah Elizabeth (Libby) Nelson lived in the shadows of St. Paul's Church from the mid 19th century through the early 20th century before changes in the character of the area eclipsed a traditional lifestyle and compelled her to abandon a three-generation family homestead.

Born in 1849, Libby was the daughter and granddaughter of enslaved African Americans living on small strip of land that bordered the eastern edge of the church grounds. On a journey to freedom from slavery, her father Sam Nelson appeared in the area in the mid 1830s. Perhaps only intending to stay briefly, he remained in the community for more than 30 years, marrying Sarah Turner, who lived with her parents on the land near St. Paul's where they had resided since 1810.

Libby's life was conditioned by the racial prejudice that defined the Northern states through the modern civil rights movement, but she was also motivated by a deep sense of religious faith and pride in land and family accomplishments. As a youngster, she lived on property her father Sam Nelson purchased in what is today the Throg's Neck section of the Bronx, but certainly made frequent visits to her grandparents' homestead in the shadows of St. Paul's. By the time of the Civil War, after her mother's death, Libby had moved back to the small farm near St. Paul's with her father and sister, and would live there for another forty years.

Libby's family had been among the founders in the 1830s of the Asbury Methodist Church, which was an African American congregation located near St. Paul's. The creation of a new Methodist church in Mt. Vernon in the mid 1800s drew congregants away from Asbury, and the church closed. For several years, Libby attended services at St. Paul's, but she maintained a remnant of Asbury by holding Sunday school services in her home and saving donations contributed by the students. When Asbury reopened in 1890, it was partly based on funds collected over the years by Libby.

But the central devotion of her life was the family homestead passed down from her grandparents. That lifestyle, based on an older semi-rural setting, was threatened and ultimately eclipsed by the area's increasing industrialization of the late 19th century. Even an existence as a laundress could not withstand the changes in the character of the district, as Libby explained: "My sister and me lived alone; our chickens were taken and we were disturbed nights. The garbage was dumped around our place to that it was difficult for us to get to the road. It was also impossible for us to do laundry work for a

living any more, as the grass and everything was covered with ashes and the well water was spoiled.”

Libby moved to New Jersey around 1910, and later to Nyack New York. She made valiant efforts to hold rights to the land, but eventually lost control when the city foreclosed because of delinquent property taxes in 1935. During that struggle, in a communication with the City Council, she expressed the significance of the land to her: “I received a copy of the summons for taxes and have not been able to answer it till now. The land is in your hands. I am the last heir. The city may go right on and do what they like, as before. It is now over a hundred years ago, since our dear and godly grandparents, gathered their children for family prayers, morning and evening, and a blessing at each meal, and it was handed down to us, to me, the last heir. Now I can say with boldness their God is my God.”